EPISCOPAL BISHOPS

THE CHURCH IN VIRGINIA AND IN RICHMOND

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The history of the Episcopal church in Virginia is coeval with that of the colony and the State, and indeed with that of Protestant Christianity in the New World. The English colonists, who made the first permanent settlement at Jamestown three hundred years ago, brought with them, as a matter of course, their own Protestant and Episcopal Church of England, with her open Bible, her prayer-book, ministry and sacraments, as we have them to-day. The royal "articles, instructions and orders" for the colony provided "that the true word and service of God and Christian faith be preached, planted and used, according to the doctrine, rights (rites) and religion now professed and established within our realm of England." Nor was there any disposition on the part of our colonists to depart from these instructions, since at this time there had been no separation from the establishment in England, and religious differences had no part in the settlement of Virginia. So this became the legally established church of the colony, and so continued as long as it remained subject to the British Crown, and indeed, for eight years thereafter.

Some Early Workers.

At first ministers were sent over from England by the London Company, and were men most carefully selected for their character and fitness. The names of the Rev. Robert Hunt, chaplain of the first company of adventurers, and of the Rev. Alexander Whittaker, founder, with the excellent Sir Thomas Dale, of Henrico Parish, will always be held in rememberance, and there were others of whom less is known, who were also worthy of high honor. Each plantation or "hundred" was considered a parish, and was supplied, as far as possible, with a church and minister. But as the settlements spread and the county took the place of the plantation as the unit of local government the parishes became larger and comprised usually about half of a county, with well defined bounds, and containing from two to four or five churches or chapels. Each parish was the charge of one minister, and lay-readers were usually employed to assist him in maintaining regular services at his different churches. So we have the large rural parishes, which have always been a feature of the church in Virginia.

The first churches would, of course, be rude buildings of logs or plank, to be supplanted later by the handsome and substantial colonial churches, which still remain in many localities as the pride of their respective neighborhoods. As population extended westward, after the tidewater had been occupied, the formation of new parishes by successive acts of the General Assembly proceeded with it, and at the outbreak of the Revolution the whole country east of the Blue Ridge and also the lower valley was occupied by the Church. There were then about one hundred organized parishes in Virginia, very few of which were without ministers, and probably about three hundred churches.

Salary in Tobacco.

Each parish was under the control of a vestry, composed of twelve of the leading gentlemen and largest taxpayers. They were elected in the first instance by vote of the freeholders, and were thenceforward a close corporation unless dissolved by act of the legislature. The vestry was required by law to build and keep in repair a sufficient number of churches, to provide a glebe, a house and small farm, for the minister, and to pay his fixed salary of 16,000 pounds of tobacco.

They had also to provide for the poor, to oversee the processioning of land boundaries and to enforce the laws regulating the public morals. They also laid the parish levy, from which all these expenses were paid. The office of vestrymen was an important one in the administration of local affairs, and it was much sought after, an influence sufficient to gain a seat being about the only qualification necessary.

Influence of England.

Ministers were obtained from England, or if possible men were chosen here and sent to England for examination and ordination. Some ministers without standing in the old country would come to Virginia looking for a living, and would occasionally be given a parish, where they would prove to be most unworthy men, or would go from place to place officiating as opportunity was allowed them. Once installed in a parish it was almost impossible, under the law, to dispossess a minister of bad character, so that much scandal was occasioned by a few such black sheep, though their number has been grossly exaggerated.

The vestries were earnest in their endeavors to secure good ministers, and the great majority of those in the colony were godly, faithful and efficient men. Many of them were educators, as well as clergymen, and under their unaided ministry for more than a century and a half the Gospel was preached, religion was kept alive, the public conscience was trained, and, in spite of the prevailing vices of the age, multitudes of devout and honorable men and women were taught the ways of God.

In Fixed Groove.

But while the Colonial church was thus supported and protected as a part of the governmental machinery she was perforce running in a fixed groove, with no voice as a church in the management of her own affairs, and no capacity for the development of her corporate life. Her laws were made by the General Assembly and administered by the vestries, whose functions, as we have seen, were civil rather than ecclesiastical.

Her nominal bishop lived in London, and his commissary had no power and but small influence, at least after the days of Blair. She could not adopt a single rule for her own guidance, and could neither choose nor displace her ministers or other officers. This fact has been forgotten when the church has been faulted for failures and offences which she was absolutely without power either to commit or to amend.

Moved Rapidly.

Events moved rapidly in Virginia between 1760 and 1785. With revolutionary suddenness the old religious order changed and made way for the new. In a generation an established church became an anachronism. The rapid growth of other Christian bodies, aided rather than hindered by the opposition which they had met with, from whatever cause, in some quarters; dissatisfaction with an expensive and ill-adapted parochial system controlled by close vestries of aristocrats, and the patriotic revolt against English government, of which the Church of England was reckoned a part, all conspired to arouse a feeling of antagonism against the church, which increased in bitterness through a long series of years.

The wiser of her own sons saw the wisdom as well as the necessity of the separation of church and state and were prompt to bring it about, and to declare for absolute religious freedom as among the first principles of political liberty. At a blow the church was left without support, though still under control of the vestries and bound by outworn laws. It was not until 1785 that the old civil vestries were dissolved, and, as a last favor, she was allowed to organize in convention and assume direction of her distracted affairs. But even then she was too weak in resources, perhaps too wedded to an older order of things, to stem the tide which set so strongly against her. The convention made the almost inevitable error of struggling to retain the property which had been twice assured to her by the Legislature, which was misconstrued as an effort to re-establish some shadow of her former prestige and so was foredoomed to failure. Her rapidly diminishing ministers, and the people under them, became discouraged and almost hopeless under the wholly adverse conditions.

New Generation.

There remained, indeed, a larger following and a deeper attachment for the church than was probably known, but it required that a new generation should arise to restore the Episcopal Church in the new Virginia.

Bishop Madison, the first bishop of Virginia, a good and able man, but too decidedly of the old school to cope with the new conditions of his day, died in 1812. The fortunes of the church were then at their lowest ebb, and no conventions had been held for several years. A convention was called, however, for the election of a bishop, and Dr. Bracken, of Williamsburg, was chosen, but afterwards declined the office. In the meantime the Monumental Church in Richmond was being built as a memorial to the lives lost in the destruction of the Richmond Theatre in December, 1811. In 1814 the vestry of that church was looking for a rector, while a few earnest young ministers who had but lately been added to the thin ranks of the Episcopal clergy were looking for a bishop. The choice of both fell upon the Rev. Dr. Richard Channing Moore, of New York, who was consecrated the second bishop of Virginia on the 18th of May, 1814.

Religious Enthusiasm.

Bishop Moore was an eloquent preacher and a man of untiring energy and of magnetic and winning personality. Under his oversight and labors, aided by an able band of younger clergy, whose number was steadily recruited, the revival of the church began, and continued uninterruptedly. The old Episcopal families came again to her support, the old churches were restored, the old parishes rejuvenated and new ones formed and supplied with active and able ministers or missionaries. The annual conventions were seasons of remarkable religious interest and enthusiasm, and periodically gave a new impetus to the work. The Theological Seminary, near Alexandria, was founded in 1823, and the men trained there for the sacred ministry have wielded an incalculable influence for good not only in Virginia, but throughout the country and in foreign mission fields. In 1829 the Rev. William Meade, D. D., who had long been the foremost presbyter in the diocese, was elected assistant bishop to Bishop Moore.

The latter died in 1841, and the following year the Rev. John Johns, D. D., of Maryland, was chosen assistant bishop to Bishop Meade. For twenty years these good and noble men worked side by side in perfect harmony, and saw the church grow and prosper throughout the State under their administration. Bishop Meade died in Richmond in 1862, after a ministry of more than half a century devoted to the service of God in the restoration and upbuilding of the Episcopal Church in his native State.

Brief Separation.

During the War of Secession the Diocese of Virginia united with her sister dioceses of the South in the organization of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States, and Bishop Meade was its first presiding bishop. Upon the downfall of the Confederacy, however, no reason for its continuance existed, and the Southern dioceses took their places again in the General Convention, without a question on either side.

For five years Bishop Johns administered the diocese alone, but in 1867 he desired an assistant bishop, and the Rev. Francis M. Whittle, then of Louisville, Ky., was chosen, and was consecrated the following year.

The church was now just beginning to recover from the devastations of the war, but was blessed with a body of clergy and lay people whose loyalty and self-denying devotion could hardly be surpassed. In an incredibly short space of years when one considers the deep poverty of her people, her destroyed churches were rebuilt, her institutions and missionary agencies reestablished, and a new era of growth and prosperity entered upon. Bishop Johns died in 1876, and for nine years Bishop Whittle carried the burden of Episcopal duties alone, a true leader of his hosts in the abundance of his personal labors as well as in the strength of his convictions and the nobility of his character. In 1877 the State of West Virginia was made a separate diocese, and the next year the Rev. George W. Peterkin was consecrated its first bishop. Under his care the church in that diocese has grown steadily. The Rev. W. L. Gravatt was elected his bishop coadjutor in 1899.

The Present Bishop.

The Rev. Alfred M. Randolph, D. D., of Baltimore, was consecrated Assistant Bishop of Virginia in 1883, and in 1892 the diocese was again divided and Southern Virginia was erected as a new diocese with Bishop Randolph as its bishop. One year ago the Rev. Beverly D. Tucker, D. D., was consecrated as his bishop coadjutor. In 1894 the Rev. John B. Newton was chosen bishop coadjutor of Virginia, and the wisdom of the choice had been well proven when he was removed by death three years later. The Rev. Robert A. Gibson, D. D., was elected in his place, and upon the death of Bishop Whittle in 1902, became the bishop of Virginia, May he long be the last!

Such, in briefest outline, is the story of the Episcopal Church in Virginia, which has invited the general convention of the American Church to meet this year within her borders and celebrate her tercentenary. Could the rude sketch be filled in it would present a long, honorable and sacred record. But the true history of a church is written in the work she has wrought and in the lives of her children. We have mentioned the names of only her noble line of bishops.

Lack of space forbids even a meagre reference to the many honored clergymen whose labors have enriched and whose characters have adorned her annals, while to recount the great Virginians who have worshiped God at her altars and learned the law of righteousness from her teachings would be almost to tell the stars in the firmament of the Old Dominion.

The Church in Richmond.

Henrico parish, which includes the whole county, was founded with the city of Henricopolis in 1611. It originally included the greater part of Chesterfield and the upper James River Valley and northern watershed of the Appomattox, and all the parishes in that territory westward to the Blue Ridge may be said to be the daughter parishes of Henrico. The first rude church was built on the river on the west bank of the present Dutch Gap Canal, and was soon followed by a more pretentious one of brick. The first American college had been fully planned, and was about to be planted in Henrico, when the Indian massacre of 1622 wiped out the town, church and college in one fell blow. It was not long, however, before settlements were again made on the upper reaches of the James, and churches were built, of which no account has come down to us.

In 1724 the parish contained two churches and a chapel, and we have the names of Curles and later of Deep Run, churches, which continued until the Revolution. There was also a chapel at "the falls," perhaps the chapel which the vestry was ordered by the General Assembly to build in 1715.

New Churches Built.

But the mother church of Richmond proper is the "Upper Church," or "Church on Richmond Hill," known for the past two generations as St. John's Church, which was built in 1741 on two lots donated by William Byrd. The original church consisted of only the transept of the present building. The historic associations connected with this church as the meeting place of the early political conventions of the State are but incidental to its richer history as a temple of God in which the people of Richmond have worshiped for five generations. In 1814, as we have noted, the Monumental Church was opened, with Bishop Moore as its first rector. In 1830 Christ Church congregation was formed from St. John's and worshiped in the old "Pine Apple Church" on Grace Street, near Eighteenth.

St. James Church was built about 1839. In 1844-'5 St. Paul's was built by the congregation of the Monumental, most of whom removed to the new church in the latter year. A few, however, remained and were joined by the larger part of the Christ Church congregation in maintaining the old Monumental under the rectorship of the Rev. Dr. Woodbridge. Christ Church, after two removals and a fire, still remains in the flourishing church of that name on Venable Street. Grace Church, an offshoot of St. Paul's, was built about 1858, and about the same time Emmanuel Church was erected near Brook Hill, and St. Mark's was founded as a mission of St. James. These were the Episcopal churches in Richmond during and just after the war, and the names of the godly men who served them during those troubled times, Drs. Norwood, Woodbridge, Peterkin, Minnigerode, Dashiell and Baker, are writ large in the memory of our older people and in the religious history of the city.

The Mother Church.

Since the war new churches have been built and strong congregations have grown up, keeping pace with the growth of the city. Moore Memorial, now the Church of the Holy Trinity, was founded as an offshoot from St. James, and St. Andrew's as a mission of St. Paul's, while All Saints' was a colony from the Monumental.

Their handsome churches are landmarks in the neighborhood surrounding Monroe Park. The younger members of the sisterhood are the Epiphany, in Barton Heights, and the Holy Comforter, in the West End. In addition there are several mission churches, such as St. Luke's, Weddell Memorial, the Ascension, on Chestnut Hill, and others. For the colored congregations there are St. Philip's Church and the Chapel of the Good Shepherd. A devoted city missionary ministers to the sick in the hospitals and to unfortunates in other institutions, while his assistant has charge of institutional and other missionary work. There are fifteen clergymen in the old parish, regularly and most actively engaged in parochial and mission work, and one church, the Monumental, is temporarily vacant. There are few cities in the country where, in proportion to the population, the church is larger or its life more vigorous than in Richmond.

The Woman's Auxiliary headquarters will be at the Masonic Temple during the first ten days of the convention sessions. Afterwards headquarters will be removed to All Saints' Parish house. Members are requested to register at headquarters immediately on their arrival, giving their home address and office in the auxiliary, together with their address in Richmond.

There will be a daily celebration of the Holy Communion at St. Mark's Church, corner First and Clay Streets, at 5:45 A. M. and 7:30 A. M. every day during the General Convention sessions.